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Pia Eiringhaus
Ruhr-Universität Bochum

Tagungsbericht: The De-Industrializing City. Urban, Architectural, and Socio-Cultural Perspectives

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Tagung auch den Zweck, ein Forum für deutsch-niederländische Vernetzungen und den Austausch über laufende Projekte und Forschungsfragen zu bieten.

Esther Helena Arens, Universität zu Köln, esther.arenas@uni-koeln.de
Christoph Strupp, Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg, strupp@zeitgeschichte-hamburg.de

Pia Eiringhaus

Tagungsbericht: *The De-Industrializing City: Urban, Architectural, and Socio-Cultural Perspectives*

Joint workshop with the Society for the Promotion of Urban Discussion (SPUD), held at the The German Historical Institute London (GHIL) from 12 to 13 December 2016.¹

In the late twentieth century, complex developments of de-industrialization and transformation, migration and multiculturalism, conflict and resilience, farewells and new beginnings re-shaped urban environments. In order to gain more insight in the many facets of the processes transforming former industrial cities and societies, JÖRG ARNOLD (Nottingham), TOBIAS BECKER (London), SIMON GUNN (Leicester), and OTTO SAUMAREZ SMITH (Oxford) organized this joint international workshop. Experts from different disciplines were brought together to explore and debate late twentieth-century European cities as key sites of cultural and societal transformation from a comparative Anglo-German perspective.

TOBIAS BECKER chaired the first panel, “Concepts of De-Industrialization and Multi-Culturalism: A New Master Narrative of Urban History?”, which aimed at investigating ways of conceptualizing theoretical approaches and bringing together the various social, cultural, societal, and economic aspects.

¹ Der Bericht erscheint in einer ausführlicheren Fassung in H-Soz-Kult und im Bulletin des German Historical Institute London.

Focusing on employment change, JIM TOMLINSON (Glasgow) approached de-industrialization processes in Britain by pointing out strengths and weaknesses, since neo-liberalism and the formation of information and knowledge-based societies went hand in hand with inequality, insecurities, and precarious job situations. In his paper, he emphasized that de-industrialization had to be embedded in the larger processes that had already started in the 1950s.

In their contribution, called “From Fordist to Neo-Liberal Urban Spaces in Times of De-Industrialization: A Conceptual Frame for a Complex Relationship”, ARNDT NEUMANN and LUTZ RAPHAEL (Trier) advocated an integrative theoretical approach that brings together various perspectives determining the complex process of de-industrialization, including different social, cultural, architectural, and demographic trends. Using the example of Hamburg, they showed that the city’s transformation was shaped by a variety of processes, from production to creativity, rationalization to digitalization, social security to precariousness, and sub-urbanism to the renaissance of the “inner city”. These trends could provide starting points for considering the temporal and spatial specificities of the prevailing cities.

The relationship between de-industrialization and multi-culturalism in cities was explored by ELIZABETH BUETTNER (Amsterdam). She looked at changing perceptions of Indian restaurants. Multi-ethnic areas used to have a bad reputation as red-light districts with social problems and crime, but in the 1980s, the perception of Indian restaurants in particular changed. Since then, they have become popular objects of “white consumption”, as the example of London’s Brick Lane demonstrates, and Buettner emphasized the significant impact of de-industrialization on the perception of multi-culturalism in urban spaces.

The following discussion pointed out the following: Firstly, there is no general concept to explain the transformation of *the* former industrial city, since every city follows individual temporalities. Secondly, there is no single working class as a societal point of reference. It is no longer the main centre of attention, but one among others.

JÖRG ARNOLD chaired the second panel, “Social Perspectives. Community, Conflict and Cohesion: The Urban Crisis Revisited”, which focused on the interconnections between politics, economic change, and cultural means of expression. Looking at the connection between teenagers’ expectations and attitudes towards work and the formation of a specific youth culture in Britain, FELIX FUHG (Berlin) investigated the interplay between economic change and work/leisure relationships as expressed in the formation of a specific youth culture. In his presentation, he concluded that teenagers’ frustration was one of the most visible reactions to urban transformation.

Emphasizing the importance of language for the process of constituting meaning, CHRISTIANE REINECKE (Leipzig) investigated changes in the political use of the term “ghetto” from a comparative Franco-German perspective. In her paper, she argued that the “ghetto”, formerly constructed as instrument for designating social and economic urban problems, has become a means to negotiate the chances and limits of integration.

Starting from the significant question of how changes in urban cities are structured temporally, OTTO S. SMITH (Oxford) provided a critical approach to the Thatcher period, arguing that broader societal, economic, and political transformation processes since 1945 must be considered. In his paper, he showed how Thatcher made political use of a predominantly negative image of Britain’s urban spaces as a spatial-material locus for what had gone wrong. The general tendency was to identify the dualism between metropolitan city centre and periphery as the essential problem, as it created power struggles between “the core and the rest” that were negotiated in urban transformation politics.

The third panel, “City-Planning Perspectives. Urban Blight and Regeneration: The Case of Port Cities”, was chaired by SEBASTIAN HAUMANN (Darmstadt) and focused on the multi-faceted processes which maritime urban spaces transformed. Based on specific examples drawn from the port city of Hamburg, as it developed from the “poor house of Germany” to an economic success story, CHRISTOPH STRUPP’s (Hamburg) paper emphasized the significant impact of broader geo-political events on the process of de-industrializing cities. In his paper, he reflected on the interplay between macro-historical developments and social, political, and economic processes at local level. Struggles between hope and reality shaped the processes of urban transformation.

Using the example of the German city of Wilhelmshaven, JÖRN EIBEN (Hamburg) demonstrated the fatal consequences of politicians strongly promoting a utopian narrative of progress while ignoring both the critical voices of local actors and real economic trends. In the case of Wilhelmshaven, the discrepancy between hope and reality resulted in the city being publicly declared a “successfully industrialized city” — without attracting any companies. Both visibility and imaginary determine the perception of urban spaces.

In his presentation, AARON ANDREWS (Leicester) reflected on the impact of political and public discourses on Liverpool’s problematic areas between 1968 and 1982. These were mainly shaped by the parallelism of images of urban and economic decline, and local improvement activities as reflections of hope.

Gentrification is not only a radical side effect of the de-industrialization of urban spaces, but is also determined by a multiplicity of trends, as ARNDT

NEUMANN (Trier) argued in his paper. He analyzed the complex interplay between population change, migration, the decline of industrial areas and job losses, new social movements and the increasing influence of students, the collapse of modernist urban planning, and the rise of a new generation of architects in Hamburg in the second half of the twentieth century.

In the following discussion, it was suggested that the process of de-industrialization has to be embedded in a longer continuity, opening up the perspective instead of limiting discussions to the Thatcher period. Further, the significance of versatile approaches was highlighted.

Since urban transformation stands at the intersection between global developments and local/regional specificities, a differentiated investigation requires both the typical and the specific aspects to be integrated while considering the prevailing historical, economic, and social development of the particular city. This goes hand in hand with the claim that the investigation of de-industrializing cities requires a re-modelling of the classic approaches of urban history. MORITZ FÖLLMER (Amsterdam) chaired the fourth panel, "Cultural Perspectives 'Ghost Town': The Late Twentieth-Century City in the Cultural Imagination", which focused on the intersection between cultural and political factors. LUCY ROBINSON (Sussex) used the example of the British reggae singer Smiley Culture to emphasize the problematic of London as an urban space in the 1980s, including multi-culturalism, the emergence of new identities, and friction between race and class. Robinson showed not only the significance of language as a powerful instrument for criticizing racism, but also the dichotomy between state control and consumer society, which was negotiated behind the backs of ethnic minorities.

Using the popular buzzword of "glocalization", MALTE THIESSEN (Oldenburg) spoke about British town twinning from a political, cultural, and social perspective. In his paper, he identified town twinning as both a reflection of various social problems and developments, and a strategy for finding solutions. Seeing town twinning as a means to improve global understanding distracts from the fact that it also reproduces former colonial power structures in a de-colonized world.

A more detailed insight into specific actors, interests, and power constellations would have been desirable, especially in the context of "global town twinning" with formerly colonized countries. JÖRG ARNOLD emphasized the change in visual and narrative representations of industrial city landscapes in the process of de-industrialization, from the former imagery of "anti-organic" landscapes of the 1980s to contemporary representations of a romanticized "cultural industrial landscape". In this context, Arnold pointed out the problems of the construction and reproduction of a specific narrative of the industrial past,

which combines mining areas with romantic rural imagery, and thus creates a clear contrast with the “rather sinful city of London”. In the following discussion, the ambivalence of town twinning was emphasized, alternating between elitist social practice and a means of socio-cultural exchange, which highlighted the need for a critical look. The question of whether Smiley Culture must be regarded as a London-specific phenomenon or whether his agency could be transferred to other spaces emphasized the complex tension between typical and specific aspects.

The round-table discussion, “The Late Twentieth-Century City in the Continuum of the Twentieth and Early Twenty-First Centuries” was chaired by FLORENCE SUTCLIFFE-BRAITHWAITE (London). MORITZ FÖLLMER, SIMON GUNN, FLORIAN URBAN (Glasgow), and NATASHA VALL (Teesside) explored future issues in this field of research. Natasha Vall’s call to integrate gender into discussions of de-industrialization was very timely, as the pluralization of dominantly masculine discourses is overdue. The power of male perspectives was also mirrored in the conference, which emphasizes the need to consider female experiences of de-industrialization. Florian Urban argued for a stronger focus on continuities and fractures in the formation of present-day urban spaces, considering that these cities arose out of the specific urban structures of industrial cities. Calling for dominant “master narratives”, Simon Gunn argued for the need to deconstruct the dual explanation of neo-liberalism and de-industrialization, as complex and pluralist developments shaped the transformation process and neo-liberalism is only one aspect in it.

Pia Eiringhaus, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Pia.Eiringhaus@ruhr-uni-bochum.de